

A Different Look at Accountability: The EdVisions Approach

EdVisions Cooperative, a venture started by eight charter schools in Minnesota, redefines accountability for schools, teachers, and students. According to Mr. Newell, EdVisions' system of project-based learning for students and peer evaluation for teachers ensures high levels of student achievement.

BY RONALD J. NEWELL

THE ROUTINE use of norm-referenced achievement tests has been growing as the demands for accountability on the part of schools have grown. But there are dangers in using such norm-referenced, content-based tests.

For students, the tests usually measure only a limited part of a subject area, do not cover a broad range of abilities, rely too heavily on memorized facts and procedures, and fail to emphasize thinking and the application of knowledge. For teachers, too many uncontrollable variables exist for the norm-referenced tests to be sound measures of teacher performance. Teachers have different students, with different backgrounds, every year. To assume a teacher has done an excellent job in

one year — when students score high — and done a terrible job the next year — when students do not do well — is an absurdity.

As for the practice of using norm-referenced tests to evaluate schools, the absurdity continues. Score increases may or may not reflect what the school is actually doing. When teachers and schools “teach to the test,” scores can go up. But in the process, schools often leave behind the enriched curriculum and student activities that foster student growth in ways other than the acquisition of declarative knowledge.

Moreover, psychometricians agree that single test scores should *not* be used to make major educational decisions about students. Indeed, it is best to look at standardized test scores as being one among many tools for school accountability. Other methods of assessment, such as surveys of student and parent satisfaction, must also play a role. Portfolios of student (and teacher) work can be very useful. Being able to actually see what students can do with their knowledge is more important than knowing what their percentile score is.

At schools associated with EdVisions Cooperative — a teacher-owned cooperative operating in Minnesota — accountability for schools, teachers, and stu-

RONALD J. NEWELL is Learning Program Director for the Gates-EdVisions Project and an adjunct professor at Capella University, a cyberuniversity based in Minneapolis. He was also a co-founder of the Minnesota New Country School, Henderson, Minn.

dents is viewed differently. EdVisions Cooperative is made up of eight small charter schools that are student centered and teacher run. EdVisions is a professional practice organization that allows teachers to take control of and responsibility for their own work. The cooperative has developed practices and processes that allow teachers to create learning programs, to develop compensation/program tradeoffs, and to deal with teacher quality and its effect on student accountability.

EdVisions Cooperative is the recipient of a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation that calls for the creation of 15 small, focused, project-based high schools in Minnesota and Wisconsin over the next five years. To date, nine schools have been created using the New Country School model. The Gates-EdVisions Project has developed guidelines for starting charter schools that use a system of teacher-driven professional accountability.

The EdVisions accountability system is based on the premise that students can reach clearly defined, integrated standards by using a project-based system; that they can complete a personalized learning plan designed by themselves, their parents, and their teachers; and that they can achieve at the highest level possible. But students in the cooperative do not necessarily improve their achievement by spending a great many hours shackled to a desk or studying a particular textbook. In fact, there are no formal courses, and textbooks are just one of many resources for personalized learning.

The member high schools emphasize project-based learning, in which standards are embedded in an integrated curriculum. Students create projects that meet various standards or parts of standards by creating their own “performance packages” built around Minnesota’s High Standards Profiles of Learning. All students achieve the state standards by creating products that indicate a high level of understanding, not by passing knowledge-based tests. Usually the projects conclude with a performance or yield a product that can be assessed for the kind of lifelong learning skills exhibited by the student and can be measured against the inquiry-based content standards the student has made use of in the final product or performance.

Teachers at these project-based schools act as advisors and as facilitators of student learning; hence they are known as “advisors” at the schools. Teacher/advisors are generalists in that they guide an advisory group of 15-18 students through a series of integrated projects that meet various standards. The advisors are also

responsible for keeping track of the content standards students have met and the projects they have completed, so that students do accomplish what is necessary for graduation.

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As a result of this kind of learning program, teachers are also held accountable for standards beyond the norm. Rather than judge teachers and schools by what their students do on standardized state or national tests, EdVisions schools judge teachers by means of a variety of authentic tools. EdVisions believes that teachers must exhibit a wide variety of skills in order to accomplish the task of teaching real-world, lifelong learning skills. Teachers must be professionals committed to quality, they must be committed to constructivist learning, they must have an affinity for working with young people, they must have organizational and interpersonal skills, and they must exhibit leadership and initiative.

Can teachers’ mastery of such high-level skills be judged by their students’ scores on high-stakes tests? One would think that a correlation exists between these high-level teaching skills and what students achieve on standardized tests, but no direct connection has been proved. Yet if teachers are to help students acquire lifelong learning skills and to develop ways by which they can determine progress toward meeting inquiry-based standards and assess portfolios of student work, perhaps some connections between teachers’ skills and student performance will emerge. In order to make such connections, teachers need to become leaders and action researchers, not hired hands in a hierarchical, boss-driven system.

What’s more, the old means of compensating teachers — based on the continuing education credits they acquire and on the observations of principals — is also inadequate. Paying teachers to strive to do better at the old method will even be counterproductive if it interferes with students’ developing lifelong learning skills.

How then should we judge and compensate teachers? EdVisions has developed a model based on a maxim quoted in *Leadership for Student Learning: A Report of the Task Force on Teacher Leadership*: “No single principle of school reform is more valid or durable than the maxim that ‘student learning depends first, last, and always on the quality of the teachers.’”¹

However, the EdVisions model depends on teachers’ having the power to judge themselves and one another. In short, it depends on peer evaluation. The EdVisions schools have developed a method whereby teachers can judge one another and a mechanism that leads to different levels of compensation. Can teachers really undertake such activity? It appears that many people in the current school reform movement don’t believe so.

But EdVisions believes. EdVisions schools require teachers to make major decisions every day in choosing educational materials and activities, in setting standards for student behavior, in setting promotion and retention policies, in deciding school budgets, in evaluating teacher performance, and in hiring new staff members. In EdVisions schools, the teachers control their own destiny. EdVisions Cooperative members have developed a “staff performance rubric” based on five broad areas:

- working with students (e.g., establishing and maintaining relationships, making the environment conducive to learning, challenging and motivating students, understanding content standards and the selection of resources, and understanding connections between content standards and learning goals);
- working with parents (e.g., establishing and maintaining excellent relationships, informing parents of student needs, and remaining accessible to parents);
- working with staff (e.g., building and maintaining professional relationships, giving time and effort to the ongoing needs of the school, and being willing to take on committee work);
- personal growth (e.g., attending conferences, doing professional reading, using innovative practices, and developing action research and professional development plans); and
- community relationships (e.g., participating in community activities and establishing and using community connections).

Teachers and other staff members use the rubric to rate themselves and to have peers rate them. Then they create a professional development plan to meet their perceived needs. A personnel team considers these profes-

sional development plans when discussing staffing needs for the upcoming year. The personnel team ensures that all staff members have filed their professional development plans, provides oversight of the self-assessment process, makes recommendations to the site-management team with regard to merit pay and retention, coordinates staff development initiatives, provides written notice to staff members regarding renewal of licensure, and coordinates the hiring process.

Each staff member is asked to engage in self-reflection and analysis by answering two questions: “How can I better influence my students’ achievement and hence the school’s success?” and “How can I make our school program better meet the needs of students and parents?” In carrying out this self-reflection, staff members follow a four-step process: 1) asking what problem is to be addressed and what needs are to be met; 2) thinking about what ought to be done with regard to the problem and considering what time and resources are necessary to carry out a plan of action; 3) acting on the plan; 4) gathering as much data as possible on the activities and reflecting on what works and what doesn’t — and then returning to point 1.

This four-step process is part of the professional development plan, which also includes a checklist with such items as the following: creating a professional development school site team; completing the peer-review process using data from the rubric and surveys; writing the action plan, which may include such activities as attending conferences, attending college classes, doing professional reading, and so on; arranging a year-end interview with the professional development team or the personnel team; collecting student achievement data; and conducting appropriate feedback surveys. Full-time, licensed staff members must also develop two new student experiences or project activities and serve on the school board (of the charter schools) or lead a committee. An optional portion asks for the development of a personal wellness plan.

In addition, the EdVisions schools are encouraged to survey parents and students in order to gain appropriate feedback for self- and peer-analysis. Students are asked about their relationship with their advisor (i.e., their teacher) and about how effective their advisor is in establishing learning goals, planning a schedule, helping find resources, and providing good information on student progress. Parents are asked to provide feedback on the same points.

The EdVisions professional development plan focuses on accountability for student performance. Ex-

emplary professional development plans must show evidence of improved student learning and increased teacher effectiveness. A portfolio of student development, which includes completed projects and the standards met through those projects, is an integral part of the data collected. As the *Gates-EdVisions Comprehensive Guide for Scaling Up the Minnesota New Country School* states:

The teacher must adhere to the mission of professional development to prepare and support fellow educators to help all students achieve high standards of learning and development. The professional development concept of EdVisions schools links together staff development and staff assessment in one complete whole. The assessment of teacher behavior recognizes that no single unit of organization can function autonomously, encourages systems thinking, and recognizes that all activities are interdependent.²

It is possible to link student achievement to teacher effectiveness. When standards are embedded in an integrated project-based method; when teachers are empowered to develop and assess those standards; when teachers are compensated according to their students' achievement of the embedded standards; and when professional development directly supports achievement, then it is possible to have an accountability system that will ensure that students reach high levels of achievement. The Gates-EdVisions Project schools have made significant progress toward an accountability system that does not depend solely upon high-stakes testing.

1. Michael Usdan, Barbara McCloud, and Mary Podmostko, *Leadership for Student Learning: Redefining the Teacher as Leader: A Report of the Task Force on Teacher Leadership* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Educational Leadership, April 2001), p. 1.

2. *Gates-EdVisions Comprehensive Guide for Scaling Up the Minnesota New Country School* (Henderson, Minn.: EdVisions, Inc., 2001), p.17. **■**

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